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Journal article

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**The job insecurity of others: On the role of perceived national job insecurity during the
COVID-19 pandemic**

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Abstract

Political scientists and sociologists have highlighted insecure work as a societal ill underlying individuals' lack of social solidarity (i.e., concern about the welfare of disadvantaged others) and political disruption. In order to provide the psychological underpinnings of the impact of insecure work on societally-relevant attitudes and behaviors, we introduce the idea of perceived national job insecurity, defined as the perception that job insecurity is more or less prevalent in one's society (i.e., country). Across three countries (US, UK, Belgium), we find that higher perceptions of the prevalence of job insecurity in one's country has a double-edged effect—it is associated with greater perceptions of government psychological contract breach and poorer perceptions of the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, but at the same time is associated with greater social solidarity and compliance with COVID-19 social regulations. Moreover, these effects are independent of individuals' perceptions of threats to their own jobs.

Keywords: job insecurity, social perceptions, government psychological contract breach, social solidarity, COVID-19

The job insecurity of others: On the role of perceived national job insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly and dramatically impacted nearly every aspect of life (Sinclair et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2020). Not only has it forced people to adjust to unaccustomed ways of living, but it has also disrupted the work arena, with the consequence of millions of people worldwide losing their jobs (ILO, 2020). Through its continuing ramifications for lives and livelihoods, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminates the interconnectivity between the individual, the society, work, and public life. As such, the events of the pandemic provide a useful context for examining how people's perceptions about threats to their own jobs and threats to jobs more broadly in their society shape societally-relevant reactions.

In this regard, the political science and sociology literatures, as well as fledgling macro-level human resource management literature, point to insecure work as a driving factor shaping individuals' views of the functioning of government and behavior towards others in society. These literatures particularly highlight the role of how individuals think others in society are affected by a particular event. For example, Cumming et al. (2020) distinguish individuals' own experience of precarious work from their general sense of precariousness experienced by others at large. They argue that both, but especially the latter, contribute to a sense that the system of government "no longer works" (pg. 3). Rodger (2003, pg. 1) cautions that lack of secure work can contribute to a 'decivilizing tendency' that can weaken empathy and concern about those less fortunate in society. Sennett (1998) likewise argues that a lack of durable employment relations affects how people approach their personal relationships outside work and their general attitudes towards others. These outcomes are particularly relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic. A regard of others has been identified as a key factor for behavior change needed in times of the pandemic (Drury et al., 2020). Further, commentators

describe insecure work as a contributing factor to the “open-ended political crises” in the US and UK (two of the three countries studied in the present research) that “raises questions as to the structural viability and sustainability of their national recipes” (Cumming et al., 2020, pg. 4).

Work psychological research offers some initial evidence on the general link between personal job insecurity and trust in the government and attitudes towards immigrants in general (Billiet et al., 2014; Dekker, 2010; Selenko & De Witte, 2020). However, it remains silent on people’s perceptions of whether others in society experience job insecurity (i.e., the perceived prevalence of job insecurity). As an unexpected career shock (Akkermans et al., 2020), the onset of the pandemic would be expected to motivate individuals to not only assess their own job security but also to construct an understanding of whether such insecurity is widespread across their society (Hällgren et al., 2010; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). These types of prevalence estimates capture what social psychological research describes as social perception, which has been shown to be as or more important in shaping outcomes than an individual’s own experience (Buunk, 2001).

This paper leverages sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) to build a social-perception-based perspective on job insecurity that considers both (a) an individual’s perceptions of threats to his/her own job as well as (b) perceptions of the broader social context of job insecurity in the form of national job insecurity (i.e., perceived prevalence of job insecurity in one’s country). We examine the role of job insecurity and perceived national job insecurity in accounting for reactions towards (a) the governing institutions of society (perceptions of government psychological contract breach, satisfaction with government’s handling of the crisis) and (b) reactions towards members of society (i.e., adherence to COVID-19 policies, social solidarity) across three countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. In doing so, we contribute to theory and research on social

perception, expand the nomological network of job insecurity to illustrate the potentially broad consequences of insecure work, and provide insight into the psychological underpinnings of the link between insecure work and societal outcomes (Senett, 1998). Our work also offers practically relevant insights for addressing the pandemic and other economic crises. Our hypothesized model is displayed in Figure 1 and described below.

Perceived Personal and National Job Insecurity During COVID-19

Sensemaking theory suggests that disruptive and ambiguous events lead individuals to engage in a variety of efforts to make sense of these events and their implications (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). There is increased consensus that the extra-ordinary event of the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis can be understood as a type of “shock” that has disrupted nearly every aspect of people’s life, including how they interact with others, their work, and their careers (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2020). These types of disruptive events tend to trigger a process of sense-making and search for meaning. This process involves appraisal of how important aspects of one’s life might be affected (e.g., one’s own job security). Moreover, “sensemakers [are] concerned both to make sense of their selves and their external worlds” (Weick, 1995, pg. 20). Thus, sensemaking crosses the boundaries between the social and the individual as people seek to understand how events impact themselves and others, and what these impacts mean for how they should view and act towards the world around them (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015). As Krueger (1998, pg. 1) wrote, “humans, as social creatures continually perceive others and predict what others think, feel, and, most importantly, what they will do.”

Job insecurity is defined as a person’s subjective perceptions that they are at risk of losing their current employment (De Witte, 1999; Shoss, 2017). Job insecurity is distinct from job loss in that it reflects the future-focused perception of a threat (Hartley et al., 1991; Lübke & Erlinghagen, 2014). Whereas *personal* job insecurity reflects a person’s perception of risk

to his/her specific job, *perceived national* job insecurity concerns people's perceptions of the extent to which others in their societies are experiencing threat (i.e., the social perception of job insecurity). In other words, perceived national JI captures the perception that JI is relatively more or less common in one's country. We note that these social perceptions do not necessarily have to be shared by the individual such that one can perceive that many individuals in society are insecure about their jobs while one does not themselves feel insecure. Additionally, these perceptions do not need to be shared by others in society or be accurate. Indeed, social isolation and dependence on differing media sources during the pandemic likely create a situation wherein people in a given society may develop varying perceptions of the extent to which job insecurity is widespread (Bendau et al., 2020). This makes perceived national job insecurity an especially important variable to examine when trying to understand individual reactions to the pandemic.

From a sensemaking perspective, we argue that individuals' perceptions of personal and national job insecurity play an important role in how they make sense of and respond to the crisis. In particular, because the COVID-19 pandemic acts as a career-shock for people across society, people will pay attention to wider society when making sense of this event. This involves not only generating a sense of the proportion of people in society insecure about their jobs but also reacting to the government—whose role it is to build an economic and legal system that supports secure work—and to others in society—who may suffer in different ways from this event.

Impact on Reactions to Government

As an institution, government reflects the “humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interactions” (North, 1991). In the countries included in our data collection (U.S., U.K., Belgian), governments are often elected on the promises of helping their constituents achieve decent and secure work (e.g., “jobs, jobs, jobs” was an

election slogan in Belgium; elected officials in the U.S. & U.K. likewise campaign on promises about jobs). Thus, as individuals seek to make sense of the COVID-19 crisis, they may use their perceptions of job insecurity to develop reactions to their society's government.

In line with these arguments, we anticipate that job insecurity and perceived national job insecurity shape people's perceptions of psychological contract breach and satisfaction with the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Psychological contract breach refers to a person's psychological understanding of the reciprocal obligations of an entity (in our case, government) and the person (Gough, 1978; Roehling, 1997). Such obligations may be explicit or implied, and perceptions of breach occur when there is a renegeing or incongruence in expectations (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Personal job insecurity may indicate to individuals that the government has failed in its obligation to provide stable work. Indeed, the notion of social contract, which formed the basis for the notion of psychological contract (Pesquex, 2012), originated from discussions about the contract between a government and its citizens: "For example, the governed promise to pay taxes, obey the laws, and share the risk of defense in exchange for security, protection, and opportunity for development provided by the state" (Roehling, 1997). In line with these arguments, a number of articles link personal job and financial insecurity to political distrust and dissatisfaction, suggesting that people blame government for these conditions and may view them as a breach of the psychological contract (Emmenger, Marx, & Schraff, 2015; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020; Mughan, Bean, & McAllister, 2003; Wroe, 2014; Wroe, 2016). The demand for government protection against employment losses occurring during the pandemic echoes these arguments (e.g., HM Treasury, 2021; GOVTRUST Centre of Excellence, 2020; Unite, 2020).

Perceived national job insecurity may likewise indicate that something about the "system" that is broken. In their social psychological studies of relationships, Buunk and colleagues argued that people use their perceptions of the social environment to gauge the

likelihood that potential negative events could happen to them in the future (Buunk, 2001; Buunk & Van den Eijnden, 1997). For instance, the prevalence of others who are satisfied with their relationship could indicate the possibility that one's relationship could turn poor. Independent of the status of one's own job, living in a society where one perceives job insecurity to be widespread, and people fail to lead a dignified life may lead one to feel that the government has failed in its obligations (perceived psychological contract breach) and to be dissatisfied with the government's handling of the crisis. Awareness of fellow citizens in insecure jobs further makes collective context more cognitively salient, which should direct one's focus toward remedies and measures not undertaken on a collective level (Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994). Indeed, this argument has been made by those seeking to understand the roots of political disruption (e.g., Cumming et al., 2020), although research is needed at the individual psychological level.

Hypothesis 1. Personal job insecurity is (a) positively associated with perceived government psychological contract breach, and (b) negatively associated with satisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic.

Hypothesis 2. National job insecurity is (a) positively associated with perceived government psychological contract breach, and (b) negatively associated with satisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic.

In an exploratory manner, we also investigate the possibility that perceived national job insecurity and individual job insecurity interact, such that perceived national job insecurity provides the interpretive context in which individuals interpret their own insecurity. When perceived national job insecurity is high, individual job insecurity would be expected to more strongly relate to perceptions of psychological contract breach by the government and greater dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic. In such conditions,

individuals' own job insecurity would be seen as part of a larger societal problem of job insecurity and thus they may be more apt to blame the government for these conditions.

Research Question 1. Does national job insecurity strengthen (a) the positive relationship between personal job insecurity and perceived government psychological contract breach and (b) the negative relationship between personal job insecurity and satisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic?

Impact on Reactions Towards Members of Society

Although personal job insecurity and perceived national job insecurity may relate to reactions to government in similar directions, we anticipate that personal job insecurity and national job insecurity may have conflicting implications for reactions to others in society. Past research suggests that job insecurity creates a protective, self-focus where individuals are less concerned with others and behave less helpfully towards others (Billiet et al., 2014; Sverke et al., 2019). Indeed, job insecurity has been associated with negative views towards immigrants (Billiet et al., 2014) and interpersonal mistreatment (Shoss, Jiang, & Probst, 2018). Hence, the extant theory and research on job insecurity suggests that job insecure individuals would be less concerned with the welfare of others as they focus their attention on the self and perhaps view others as potential competition for jobs and resources.

In contrast, a high concern of national job insecurity indicates an awareness of others in society, a sense of awareness of a collective. This awareness makes positive action and solidarity towards that collective more likely. To this point, disaster research shows that such events can create a sense of shared fate independent of personal suffering, and hence generate collective solidarity and helping behavior (Elcheroth & Drury, 2020; Haslam et al 2012). Rodger (2003) also describes how solidarity may also emerge from a sense of mutual insurance. In an environment where job insecurity is perceived to be particularly high, people

may be particularly attuned to the need to care about and protect others in hopes that others will do the same if/when the individual needs help for themselves (Buunk, 2001).

We hence arrive at two different predictions for the relationships between personal and perceived national job insecurity and our societally-oriented outcome variables: social solidarity (expressed concern about the well-being of those less fortunate in society and compliance with COVID-19 social mitigation recommendations. Social solidarity is defined as expressed concern about the well-being of those less fortunate in society (Méda, 2019). Social solidarity considered crucial for society's ability to address the COVID-19 pandemic and other extreme events (Drury et al., 2020). It is also argued to underlie public policy considerations regarding the welfare state because such views shape the policies that are politically palatable (Van Oorschot, 2006). As such, questions about social solidarity are regularly asked on societal surveys such as the European Values Survey. It is important to note that perceived national job insecurity is distinct from social solidarity. Whereas perceived national job insecurity reflects a prevalence judgement about others' job insecurity, social solidarity reflects concern about the experiences of those who are disadvantaged in society. There are many reasons why these may diverge (e.g., Van Oorschot, 2006). However, in our study, we anticipate that viewing job insecurity as particularly prevalent in society may enable a sensemaking about the nature of society that lends itself to greater concern about those who are disadvantaged by the current societal system.

Compliance with COVID social recommendations, particularly at the time our research was conducted, was described in all three study countries as measures to protect others especially those in vulnerable populations. In other words, while compliance with COVID-19 hygiene recommendations was communicated as a way to protect the self from COVID-19, compliance with COVID-19 social recommendations was hailed as a way to protect others (Pfattheicher et al., 2020). Moreover, actions to reduce the spread of the virus

enhance society's ability to forestall the economic damage that would result from the virus spreading unchecked. Thus, we view compliance with COVID-19 social recommendations in line with Johnson, Dawes, Fowler, and Smirnov (2020), as a potential behavioral indicator of the extent to which individuals engage in cooperative action for the good of others in society. In line with the arguments above, we anticipate that perceived national job insecurity engenders a social awareness that may heighten the likelihood of people complying with COVID-19 social recommendations. In other words, awareness of risks to a large number of others' jobs would be associated with greater efforts on the part of individuals to engage in behavior that is socially responsible.

Hypothesis 3. Personal job insecurity is negatively associated with (a) social solidarity and (b) compliance with COVID-19 social recommendations.

Hypothesis 4. National job insecurity is positively associated with (a) social solidarity and (b) compliance with COVID-19 social recommendations.

We also inquired, in an exploratory manner, whether personal and national job insecurity might interact to predict our social outcomes. From an interaction perspective, high perceived national JI might be a context in which negative societal implications of personal job insecurity are mitigated. In particular, the combination of higher individual and higher perceived national job insecurity may lead to a greater sense of shared experience and, therefore, more social solidarity and socially-interested actions (Rodger, 2003). Thus, we also examine the interactive effect.

Research Questions 2. Does national job insecurity reduce the negative relationship between personal job insecurity and (a) social solidarity and (b) compliance with COVID-19 social recommendations?

Method

Participants and Procedure

We test these hypotheses and research questions with data from individuals across three countries. Because perceived national job insecurity captures one's (however valid or invalid) perceptions of their society, capturing the implications of variance in these perceptions for outcomes requires sampling individuals across several different societies. This variance maximizing strategy allows for making more general inferences about a phenomenon that is theorized to occur across contexts. The samples were drawn from the US, the UK and Belgium, three countries strongly affected by the pandemic with similar public health guidance. Further, our measure of personal job insecurity has also been previously translated to widely used in these countries. As a result, utilizing these three samples allowed us to examine the impact of perceived national job insecurity and personal job insecurity that transcends national boundaries in samples where the measurement of personal job insecurity has been previously validated.

Data were collected by a survey panel company (Respondi) during the week of July 13, 2020. The sample consists of 453 British employed workers, 518 American employed workers and 460 Flemish (i.e., Dutch speaking region of Belgium) employed workers. Participants were informed that participation was completely voluntarily, that the survey was fully anonymous and that all answers would be treated confidentially. In return for their participation, respondents received token points that could be exchanged for small monetary rewards over the long-term. The study gained ethical approval by all three universities involved.

UK sample. The respondents' mean age was 47.35 years ($SD = 12.15$). The majority of the sample was male (53%), indicated that they did not belong to an ethnic minority group (93%), and finished some sort of tertiary education (56%). Based on the ISCO8 classification,

9% was a low skilled blue collar worker, 5% was a high skilled blue collar worker, 32% was a low skilled white collar worker and 54% was a high skilled white collar worker (according to ISCO-08 classification codes). While 42% indicated they were working on site, 41% answered that they were working entirely from home. A total of 17% combined working on site with working from home, to various degrees.

US sample. On average, the respondent's age was 46.67 years ($SD = 12.04$). Most participants were male (50.3%), white (82%), and had a degree of tertiary education (76%). A total of 5% was a low skilled blue collar worker, 7% was a high skilled blue collar worker, 29% was a low skilled white collar worker and 60% was a high skilled white collar worker. Whereas 47% responded that they did not work from home, 39% answered that they were currently working five days a week from home and 14% indicated that they worked some days of the week at home.

Belgian sample. The mean age of the sample was 45.49 ($SD = 10.90$). More than half of the participants were male (51%) and did not belong to an ethnic minority group (98%). Of the participants, 46% completed tertiary education. A total of 15% was a low skilled blue collar worker, 7% was a high skilled blue collar worker, 39% was a low skilled white-collar worker and 40% was a high skilled white-collar worker. The majority of the sample did not work from home (52%), 31% stated that they were working completely from home and 17% partly worked from home.

Measures

Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*), unless stated otherwise.

Perceived individual job insecurity was measured using the four-item Job Insecurity Scale (De Witte, 2000; Vander Elst et al., 2014; $\alpha_{UK} = .91$, $\alpha_{US} = .89$ and $\alpha_{Belgium} = .90$). A sample item is "I think I might lose my job in the near future".

Perceived national job insecurity was measured with four items which were developed for the purpose of this study ($\alpha_{UK} = .88$, $\alpha_{US} = .88$ and $\alpha_{Belgium} = .89$). The scale was inspired by Låstad and colleagues' (2015) references to the collective level of job insecurity in their job insecurity climate scale. We adapted the organizational level to the national context and mirrored the framing of the items of the Job Insecurity Scale (De Witte, 2000). Although the scale originally included a fourth and positively framed item, we omitted this indicator from the analyses due to a poor factor loading on the shared latent variable in all three countries. The final items were “In [country] there is a general feeling that many people will soon lose their jobs,” “In [country] a lot of people feel insecure about the future of their jobs,” and “In [country] many people think that they might lose their job in the near future.” The standardised factor loadings per country are demonstrated in Table 1.

Psychological contract breach by the government was assessed using four items from Robinson's and Morrison's (2000) psychological contract breach scale ($\alpha_{UK} = .88$, $\alpha_{US} = .84$ and $\alpha_{Belgium} = .83$). References to ‘my employer’ were changed to ‘our country’s government’ to reflect attitudes towards the government instead of the organization (e.g., “We have not received everything promised to us by our country's government”).

Government satisfaction with handling the pandemic was measured by one item based on the government satisfaction item in the *European Social Survey* (2018). The item reads “How satisfied are you with the way in which your country's government is handling the COVID-19 crisis?”. Responses ranged from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 5 (*extremely satisfied*).

Solidarity was measured using five items based on the European Values Study ($\alpha_{UK} = .86$, $\alpha_{US} = .90$ and $\alpha_{Belgium} = .84$). Respondents were asked the following: “When you think about the living conditions in [country], to what extent do you feel concerned about the living conditions of:...”. Subsequently, respondents had to indicate their degree of solidarity towards

five groups of vulnerable people: elderly people, unemployed people, people affected by COVID-19, people in poverty, and people who worry about keeping their jobs. The last three groups were added for this study. Responses ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

Compliance to COVID-19 measures was assessed using Nivette et al.'s (2020) compliance with COVID-19 social regulations measure ($\alpha_{UK} = .78$, $\alpha_{US} = .82$ and $\alpha_{Belgium} = .66$). Using a four-point scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *all of the time*), respondents were asked to which degree they adopted the following protective behaviors in response to COVID-19: adhere to social distancing, avoid contact with people at risk, avoid groups, don't shake hands, stay at home, wear a face mask in public, use public transport only when necessary, and stay home with symptoms. The last two items were excluded from the analyses because they did not load on a shared latent factor in any of the three countries. The item referring to wearing a face mask was omitted in all three samples due to a factor loading of .22 in the UK sample, perhaps due to the fact that mask-wearing wasn't widely recommended at the time of data collection.

Analyses

The statistical analyses were performed by means of Mplus version 8.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). We used a robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLR) for all analyses, which provides standard errors and fit indices that are robust to non-normality (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). We used full information MLR estimation, which allows to use the data from all respondents by estimating parameters for missing data. 5%, 6% and 6% of individuals in the UK, US, and Belgium, respectively, had some degree of missing data, with most respondents only having missing data on one or two items. This means that 94-95% of our sample had no missing data on any of the study variables we used in this research model. First the factor loadings and structure of the variables were examined using a confirmatory factor analysis. Then measurement invariance across samples was tested by

imposing a sequence of restrictions on the countries' measurement models. Configural invariance (i.e., no constraints) was compared to metric invariance (i.e., factor loadings) and scalar invariance (i.e., intercepts) models. Given that measurement invariance was reached, we continued with a pooled dataset. As recommended by Morin et al. (2016), we saved the factor scores of the most invariant model as to preserve the measurement invariance structure when merging the different samples. Factor scores are a good alternative to manifest variables as they partially control for measurement error by assigning less weight to items with higher levels of measurement error. Furthermore, this strategy ensures comparability of the results across groups (Morin et al., 2016). We created an interaction term of the latent variables of perceived individual and national job insecurity using the 'XWITH' statement in Mplus, which was also saved as a factor score. We conducted structural equation modelling to test our hypotheses, in which we controlled for country to address any systematic country effects (Abadie et al., 2017). UK and US were included as dummy variables, with Belgium as the reference category. As a supplementary analysis, we investigated whether similar findings emerge when examining solely within-country variability in the variables of interest. We conducted a multiple group analysis in which we used latent variables and took into account the measurement invariance.

Results

The configural model provided a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(537) = 1389.197$, CFI = 0.933, TLI = 0.922, RMSEA = 0.058, SRMR = 0.052), with factor scores that were all well above the suggested threshold of .40 (Harrington, 2009). One exception to this was the 'don't shake hands' item of the COVID-19 measures scale, which had a factor loading of .336 in the Belgian sample. However, we chose to include the item as it appeared to be a good indicator of the shared latent factor in the two other countries, and as the loading in the Belgian sample was not far below .40. The results supported metric invariance of the measurement model (χ^2

(569) = 1445.061, CFI = 0.931, TLI = 0.924, RMSEA = 0.057, SRMR = 0.055), as indicated by a Δ CFI that was less than .01 and a Δ RMSEA that was below .015 (Chen, 2007; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). However, we had to reject the scalar invariance hypothesis ($\chi^2(601) = 1618.329$, CFI = 0.920, TLI = 0.916, RMSEA = 0.060, SRMR = 0.057), as the Δ CFI was above .01. We therefore proceeded with the metric invariance model, which suffices if mean levels are not compared (Little, 2013).

Table 2 shows as expected, individual and national job insecurity correlate positively but not very strongly with each other, confirming the discriminant validity of the two variables. Table 3 presents the results of our structural equation model in which satisfaction with government, psychological contract breach by government, solidarity, and compliance to COVID-19 measures were regressed on perceived individual and national job insecurity, and their interaction term. In line with our expectations in Hypothesis 2a & 2b, perceived national job insecurity was related to greater perceived breach of the psychological contract by the government ($b = .39$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), and with lower satisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic ($b = -.32$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$). Contrary to Hypothesis 1a and 1b, individual job insecurity was negatively related to government psychological contract breach ($b = -.08$, $SE = .03$, $p = .02$), and not related to government satisfaction ($b = -.07$, $SE = .04$, $p = .09$). No significant interaction effects emerged for government psychological contract breach ($b = -.05$, $SE = .03$, $p = .42$) or for satisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic ($b = .13$, $SE = .07$, $p = .06$), addressing Research Question 1.

As expected in Hypothesis 4a & 4b, national job insecurity was positively related to both solidarity ($b = .32$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$) and to compliance with COVID-19 social recommendations ($b = .14$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$). In contrast to Hypothesis 3a & 3b, there was a positive and significant relationship between personal job insecurity and solidarity ($b = .05$, $SE = .02$, $p < .01$) and we did not find a significant relationship between personal job

insecurity and compliance to COVID-19 measures ($b = -.02, SE = .01, p = .28$). The interaction term of personal and national job insecurity was not significantly related to neither solidarity ($b = -.02, SE = .03, p = .60$) nor to compliance with COVID-19 recommendations ($b = -.03, SE = .03, p = .21$), addressing Research Question 2.

Supplemental Analyses

The results of the multiple group analysis are displayed in Table 4. It is important to note that these results are not directly comparable to the results above because they only speak to the implications of within-country variance in our predictors (e.g., the range of perceived national job insecurity observed within Belgium versus the range of perceived national job insecurity observed across the entire sample). Similar to the pooled data, national job insecurity was significantly and positively related to both psychological contract breach by the government ($b_{UK} = .42, SE = .09, p < .001$; $b_{US} = .35, SE = .09, p < .001$; $b_{Belgium} = .26, SE = .09, p < .001$) and solidarity ($b_{UK} = .13, SE = .06, p = .04$; $b_{US} = .40, SE = .05, p < .001$; $b_{Belgium} = .26, SE = .05, p < .001$) within all three countries. In two of the three samples (the US and Belgium) national job insecurity was also significantly related to government satisfaction with handling the pandemic ($b_{US} = -.36, SE = .09, p < .001$; $b_{Belgium} = -.30, SE = .10, p < .001$) as well as compliance to COVID-19 guidelines ($b_{US} = .16, SE = .05, p < .001$; $b_{Belgium} = .13, SE = .05, p < .001$). When separately analyzing the countries, we found a significant relationship between personal job insecurity and solidarity only within the UK ($b_{UK} = .09, SE = .03, p = .01$). In the pooled sample, we found a significant and negative relationship between personal job insecurity and psychological contract breach by the government. We found coefficients of a similar size in the separate analysis in the UK and Belgium, but effects were non significant ($b_{UK} = -.10, SE = .06, p = .10$; $b_{Belgium} = -.09, SE = .06, p = .13$). We found a significant interaction effect of individual and national job insecurity on government satisfaction in the US ($b_{US} = .22, SE = .10, p = .03$). The nature of

this relationship suggests that perceived national job insecurity was most impactful among those feeling relatively more secure (see Figure 2).

Discussion

This study set out to introduce the concept of national job insecurity (people's perceptions about other citizens' job insecurity) as a conceptual bridge to understand how insecure work may shape citizens' reactions to government and others in society in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study show that the perception of other citizens' job insecurity plays a pivotal role for pandemic relevant behaviors and attitudes. National perceived job insecurity is related to negative attitudes towards the government, in the form of perceived contract breach and lowered satisfaction, but at the same time it is positively associated with attitudes of solidarity and even compliance with Covid-19 health measures to protect the health of others. Importantly, it does so to a much higher degree than individual job insecurity does (e.g., Probst et al 2020). The findings on contract breach and solidarity even remained robust also when looking at variability of perceptions within each respective country.

Implications for Theory

This research widens current conceptualizations of job insecurity, which is understood as a mostly individual (or organizational) level phenomenon, driven by employment circumstances, and affecting individual and organizational behavior. We show that when it comes to understanding collectively relevant attitudes and behaviors, these outcomes are more a function of perceptions of the social environment than perceptions of one's own personal risk. We explain this effect from a sense-making perspective (Weick, 1995). National perceived job insecurity hereby seems to offer an informational cue that informs satisfaction with the government, solidarity towards others and even compliance to governmental health measures. In contrast, individual job insecurity functions less strongly as

cue in this situation. What seems clear from our study is that when it comes to nationally relevant behaviors and attitudes, it is the perceptions of the widespread nature of other citizens' job insecurity, rather than one's own, that plays a role. These findings are particularly interesting in light of research from earlier in the pandemic that linked personal job insecurity to personal hygiene COVID-recommendations (Probst et al., 2020). As businesses open up and social behavior becomes particularly important, compliance may be more related to social perceptions than individuals' own job risk.

These findings extend research on sensemaking and on social perceptions, especially during times of an ambiguous societal crisis. The research reported here suggests that it is an individual's perceptions of others' experiences and not necessarily their own experiences that shapes how they view the system in charge of the collective (i.e., government) and others in their society. This may be a construal or target effect where perceptions targeted at a given level (e.g., macro-level government, society) are more strongly associated with reactions at that level. In other words, people's judgements about the context of work seems particularly relevant to understanding people's judgements and reactions to other elements of this context (i.e., institutions, people in society more generally).

Contrary to our expectations, individual job insecurity was related to more (and not less) solidarity, measured as concern for vulnerable groups. Perhaps people who were job insecure felt more part of vulnerable groups in general, which heightened their solidarity with them. Selenko and De Witte (2020) similarly found that job insecurity led people to feel closer to and more solidarity with unemployed people. The effect in our study was small and could only be replicated in one of the three samples when analyzed separately. Also, different to the predictions, social perceptions of job insecurity did not ease the effect of individually felt job insecurity on societal outcomes; although this might depend on the context. Data from

the US showed that the effect of national job insecurity seemed to matter more for satisfaction with the government when an individual's job insecurity was lower.

Overall, these findings offer theoretical advances in three major domains. First, it provides a psychological foundation for understanding how people's views about the security of jobs (their own and others) are linked to their views about government and other people in their society. This psychological foundation suggests that it is useful to distinguish individuals' views of the security of their own work from their perceptions about what others in society experience. Interestingly, it is the latter that seems most important for societal outcomes. These findings may help political scientists and others to refine theories on how elements of work relate to how individuals view society's institutions and members.

Second, we advance theory in the job insecurity literature, which has typically examined either personal job insecurity or shared (i.e., aggregate) perceptions of job insecurity (e.g., Låstad et al., 2018). Our findings complement these efforts and suggest that job insecurity research, especially when seeking to understand reactions to major widespread employment shocks, may benefit from also considering social perceptions of job insecurity. Past research has suggested that individuals develop perceptions of personal job insecurity in part based on their perceptions of the broader macro-environmental forces (Lee et al., 2017; Jacobson & Hartley, 1991; Koen & Parker, 2020). If this is the case, what is remaining in personal job insecurity when accounting for perceived national job insecurity may reflect threats unique to the individual (e.g., threats linked to their own performance or own circumstances), which our findings suggest have less impact on societally- and governmentally-directed outcomes. Finally, our research contributes to a growing field of study aimed at understanding disasters. Here, we contribute insight into the importance of social perception as a meaningful perception that can shape how individuals react.

Implications for Practice

The lessons to be learned for governments and policy makers from this study indicate a double-edged sword: On the one hand, governments are more likely to be evaluated as doing their job badly during periods of high perceived national job insecurity, which might even lead to a regime change (see e.g., Lewis-Beck & Whitten, 2013). On the other hand, when it comes to attitudes and behavior towards fellow citizens, high national job insecurity can have positive effects. Rather than pushing people away from each other, the perception of other citizen's suffering from job insecurity actually predicted the opposite: It was associated with more societal solidarity and a greater willingness to adhere to measures to protect the health of others and likely, by extension, to be protected by others who presumably should also react this way. This qualifies propositions by others, that labor-flexibility would create a 'dog eat dog' world of disenfranchisement (e.g., Standing, 2020). This study shows that if this sentiment is perceived to be shared widely, rather more solidarity is the case. This is reminiscent of the concept of shared fate during times of disasters: because of the pandemic, job insecurity might have acted as yet another societal hardship.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited in several ways. First, our respondents are not a representative sample of the three sets of working populations – they are more highly skilled and overrepresented regarding (higher levels) white collar workers. That is a classical finding for similar surveys. It might have affected our results however, as there is some mixed evidence suggesting that job insecurity may be more prevalent among blue collar workers (Keim et al., 2014). Consequently, some associations might be lower here than in the population, possibly leading to reduced correlations for personal job insecurity.

Second, our study design utilizes self-report surveys assessed cross-sectionally. We chose a cross-sectional design because we anticipated that people's perceptions of their own risk and their social environment influence sensemaking in a nearly immediate fashion.

Further, we were interesting in between-person effects, which cross-sectional studies can appropriately capture. We were also concerned that repeated measures studies would add too much participant burden during times of crisis, which could lead to the attrition of those who are more insecure. We deemed self-report appropriate because most of the concepts studied are inherently perceptual, and our measurement tests suggest that individuals can distinguish among these constructs and do so in a way that is consistent across the countries involved in this research. Although one might be concerned about potential social desirability with regard to COVID-19 compliance, recent research suggests that potential social desirability bias for these types of questions is minor (Jensen, 2020). However, future research may seek out various objective indicators (e.g., how layoffs/the economy are being portrayed in various news outlets, objective COVID-19 spread, voter polls, etc.). Finally, we used a single item for satisfaction with the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. While single items are preferable when seeking to capture holistic preferences (Drolet & Morrison, 2001; Nagy, 2002), future research may seek to explore this construct further.

We encourage future work on social perception, both within the job insecurity literature and beyond. Within the realm of job insecurity, researchers might examine social perceptions of job insecurity within organizations, communities, or groups as predictors of meaningful outcomes with reference to each. Given the variability in social perception of job insecurity found here, research may seek to understand the sources of variation in perceived national job insecurity and expand its nomological net. Additionally, the mechanism behind our findings warrants more exploration: It is possible that social perception of work-relevant phenomena on a national level makes the national collective salient in an individual's personal identity structure (Turner et al 1994). In that regard it might trigger other collectively relevant sentiments, such as perception of oneself as a proud (or not so proud) member of that collective, and associated attitudes.

Research may also seek to examine other domains of social perception to see if similar findings emerge. For example, social perceptions of what fellow citizens earn, how safe jobs should be, what acceptable behavior at work is, might have far reaching implications for how people see their own work. Indeed, future studies might investigate broader social perception of work-related phenomena, and their role in how people see themselves and their place in society.

Our findings along with larger societal discussions about jobs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that future research on broader societal consequences of job insecurity is warranted. For example, there is limited literature that speaks the impact of job insecurity (in the wider sense) on social attitudes and behaviours, such as voting behaviours and the attitudinal antecedents of voting, or on the attitudes towards politics, society and trust in leadership (Wroe, 2014; 2016). Research might also examine the consequences of entering the workforce when one perceives there to be great prevalence of job insecurity, similar to research on the impact of economic conditions at workforce entry (Bianchi, 2013), and the long-arm impacts of job insecurity, similar to work on the impact of parental job insecurity on children's attitudes and behaviors (Zhao, Lim, & Teo, 2012).

Conclusions

In summary, our findings from three countries suggest that the social perception of job insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis plays an important role in how individuals react towards their government and to others in society. While those who have higher as opposed to lower perceived national job insecurity tend to view their government as breaching the psychological contract and poorly managing the pandemic, they also tend to express more solidarity towards others and to take more precautions to protect others from the virus.

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Figure 1

Hypothesized Model of Personal and Perceived National Job Insecurity

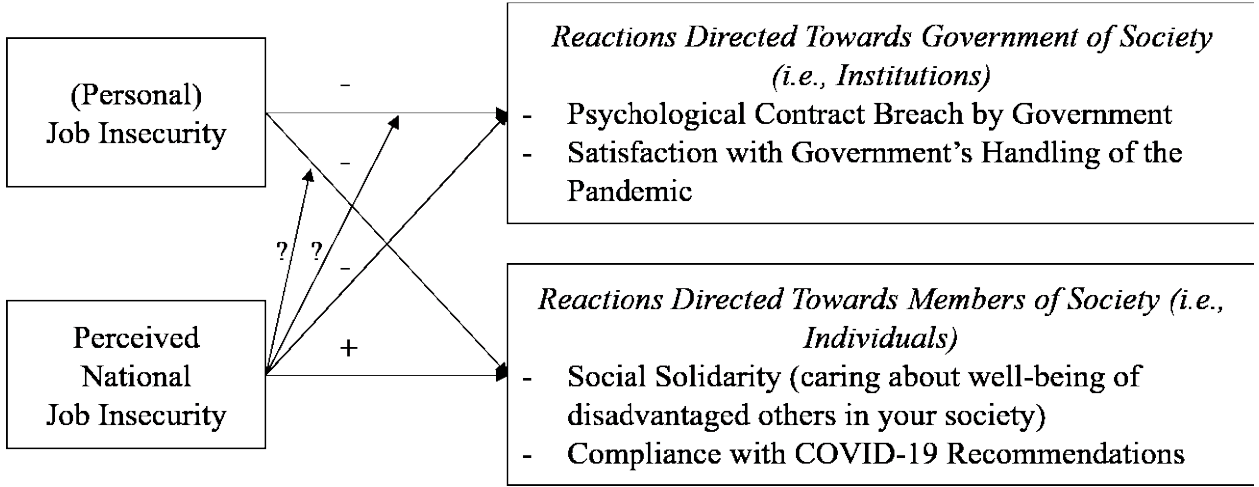


Figure 2

Interaction Effect of Personal and Perceived National Job Insecurity on Government

Satisfaction in the US.

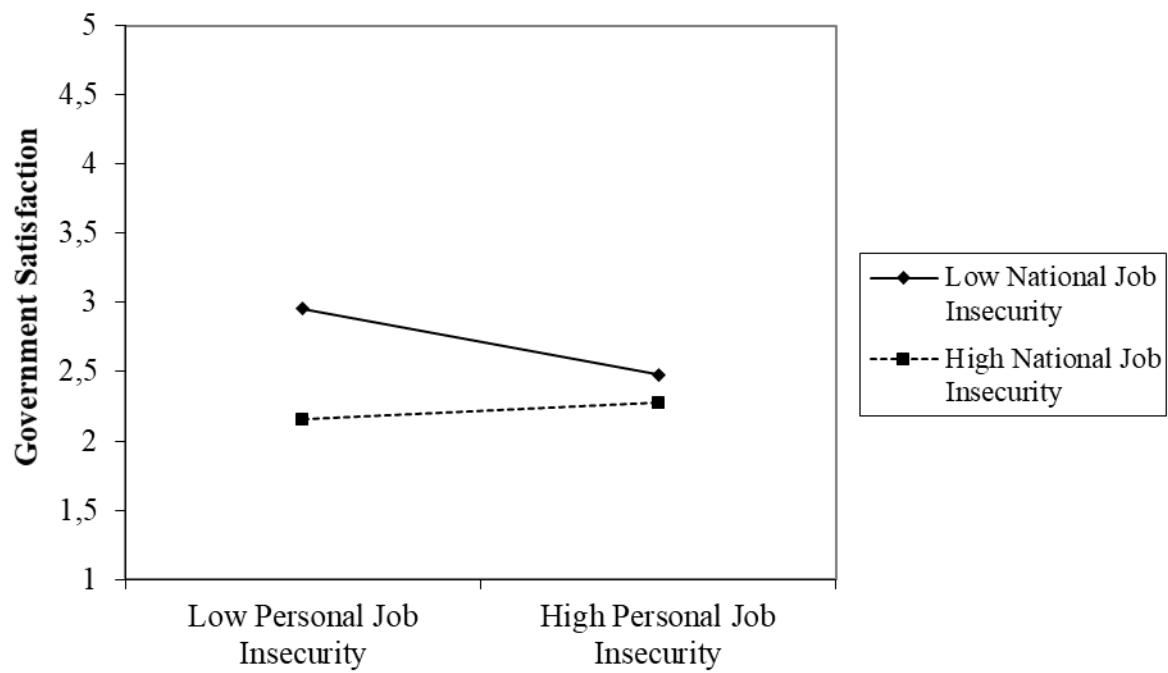


Table 1*Standardized Factor Loadings of the Configural Invariance Measurement Model.*

Perceived national job insecurity scale	Factor loadings and estimates (SE)		
	UK	US	Belgium
In [country] there is a general feeling that many people will soon lose their jobs	.84 (.03)	.78 (.03)	.80 (.03)
In [country] a lot of people feel insecure about the future of their jobs	.81 (.05)	.87 (.02)	.87 (.02)
In [country] many people think that they might lose their job in the near future	.86 (.04)	.89 (.02)	.88 (.02)

Table 2

Pearson Correlations of Personal and National Job Insecurity with COVID-19 Relevant Outcomes.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Personal job insecurity	2.09	0.98	(.90)					
2. National job insecurity	3.88	0.74	.18**	(.87)				
3. Psychological contract breach government	3.38	0.95	.02	.18**	(.85)			
4. Government satisfaction	2.65	1.30	-.08**	-.13**	-.61**	-		
5. Solidarity	3.65	0.81	.13**	.27**	.16**	-.08**	(.87)	
6. COVID-19 compliance	3.36	0.55	.03	.17**	.01	.03	.26**	(.77)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Unstandardized Structural Coefficients (and Standard Errors) of Job Insecurity, National Job Insecurity and their Interaction Explaining COVID-19 Relevant Outcomes.

	PCB government		Satisfaction w/ government		Solidarity		COVID-19 compliance	
	b	SE(b)	b	SE(b)	b	SE(b)	b	SE(b)
Personal job insecurity	-.08*	.03	-.07	.04	.05**	.02	-.02	.01
National job insecurity	.39***	.03	-.32***	.06	.32***	.03	.14***	.02
Personal x National	-.05	.03	.13	.07	-.02	.03	-.03	.03
UK (vs others)	.01	.07	.26**	.08	-.01	.04	.01	.03
US (vs others)	.01	.06	-.10	.08	.01	.03	-.01	.03

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Unstandardized Structural Coefficients (and Standard Errors) of Individual, National Job Insecurity and their Interaction Predicting Outcomes per Country

	UK				US				Belgium			
	PCB gov	Sat. gov	Solidarity	Cov.com.	PCB gov	Sat. gov	Solidarity	Cov.com.	PCB gov	Sat. gov	Solidarity	Cov.com.
Pers.job insecurity	-.10 (.06)	-.08 (.07)	.09* (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.03 (.07)	-.09 (.07)	.02 (.03)	.03 (.03)	-.09 (.06)	-.02 (.07)	.03 (.04)	-.04 (.04)
Nat.job insecurity	.42*** (.09)	-.18 (.11)	.13* (.06)	.08 (.05)	.35*** (.09)	-.36*** (.09)	.40*** (.05)	.16*** (.05)	.26*** (.09)	-.30*** (.10)	.26*** (.05)	.13*** (.05)
Pers.x Nat. job insecurity	-.08 (.11)	.04 (.13)	-.15 (.08)	.05 (.06)	-.06 (.11)	.22* (.10)	.05 (.05)	-.09 (.05)	.02 (.12)	.01 (.14)	-.02 (.07)	-.05 (.07)

Note. PCB gov = perceived psychological contract breach of the government; Sat. gov = satisfaction with the government; Cov. Com. = compliance to COVID-19 measures. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.